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OPEN DOORS IN PERSIA

by

HERRICK B. YOUNG

and

J. CHRISTY WILSON

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WIDER and wider swings the door for the Gospel message in Persia. As the grip of conservative Islam on the people relaxes more and more in the face of a widespread program of modernization and Europeanization, greater and greater opportunities are offered for missionaries as individuals and through schools and hospitals to bring the Glad Tidings to the nation of Persia.

The government ruling of a little more than two years ago, forbidding the use of the Bible as a textbook in the schools, and requiring that all students pass examinations in their respective religions, has in many instances been a blessing in disguise.

One of the most striking examples of this occurred in Resht this last spring when the principal of the American Mission School for Girls was called on by the government to serve as the examiner for the children registered as Christians. With her on the examining board sat two educated young Moslem women, teachers in the government school for girls in Resht. One of these two young ladies was so much struck by the questions and the answers that a few days later she sent for one of the girls who had been examined.

The Making of a Christian

"Tell me where you learned the answers to the questions which were asked you about Christianity," she ordered. "They did not sound like the statements our children are made to memorize to answer questions about Moslem law. They seemed to be your own ideas."

"Yes, 'khanum,' " the girl replied, "in the American Mission School we are taught to consider how Christianity can be applied in our lives and how the principles of love and kindness can be carried out in our homes and with our friends."

"Can you get me a copy of your Holy Scriptures, the Bible?" the Moslem teacher went on. "I can, and will," the girl replied. The Bible was delivered to her about three months ago. This last week she came to the head of the American School, saying that she had read and re-read the Gospels and that she would like to become a Christian.

Little did any one dream eight years ago when a twelve-year-old boy was entered in the junior dormitory of the American College of Teheran that he

would return to the sacred shrine city of Meshed as an earnest Christian to become assistant principal of the largest boys' school in the city. After finishing his work for the B.A. degree at the American College of Teheran this last June, this young man returned to his native province of Khorrassan to secure funds to take him to America to study in one of the Presbyterian seminaries preparatory to coming back to spend his life in Christian work with his own people. While he was in the city of Meshed he was offered the position of assistant principal of the elementary and secondary school operated for the boys of Meshed by the Shrine of Imam Reza.

"What about the fact that I am a Christian?" he asked the director of the shrine affairs who was urging him to accept the position. "Oh, that's all right," the Moslem official declared, "we know you can make something out of the school since you are a graduate of the American School in Teheran."

"I felt it was too good an opportunity to lose," was his own comment in explaining why he had changed his plan for the coming year.

And a very real opportunity is his. May we all hope and pray that he may be strong enough to continue in his splendid Christian life there in the very heart of Persian Islam.

Opiate Stills a Baby's Cries

The fact that lives can be saved through intelligent nursing is spreading more and more throughout Persia, thanks to the ministry of the American Mission hospitals. "I want a room for my baby for two weeks," declared a Persian father recently to one of the doctors in charge of a mission hospital. The doctor was able to provide the room and upon examination of the child discovered that its illness was caused by opium. He spoke of this to the father and mother, asking if they had been guilty of giving the child opium to quiet its cries, a common custom in Persia. "No," the father declared, "it is the baby's grandmother that has been doing it. We wished the baby to be properly cared for here in your hospital to prove to the grandmother that opium was not necessary for its recovery." "You are quite correct," the doctor returned. "This baby needs no medicine, it only needs proper care."

Nursing as a profession for Moslem girls is becoming quite possible. In one of our hospitals four Moslem nurses care for the patients, having completely discarded the veil, of course. And as they make their rounds from bed to bed, it is indeed inspiring to an onlooker to stand in the corridor and hear patient after patient ask to hear more about Jesus and to see those who can read, forget their pain in the joyous message of the Master as they find it in the pamphlets and portions of the Scriptures given to them.

The Hospital — a Door of Hope

However, nothing perhaps brings a greater thrill than to stand on the veranda of our magnificent hospital at Meshed and watch the throngs of lame, halt and blind coming there for treatment; and to realize that many of them have literally crept from distant parts of Persia to the Moslem shrine in Meshed, hoping against hope for relief from their ailments. Imagine the depths of despondency when the shrine is reached and no miracle occurs for their poor battered bodies. Then they hear of the American Hospital and as a last resort half-heartedly crawl to its door—to find capable doctors and nurses ready and sympathetic to care for their needs. And what an opportunity is offered to the young woman evangelist who gathers group after group of the women into a little anteroom to give them tidings of Christ through picture and story, while they wait their turn to see the doctor.

As more and more of the Persians are learning to read and as newspapers and magazines are growing more common, the distribution of Christian literature is having even greater effect than it did formerly. One of the most ardent distributors of Christian pamphlets and tracts is Mansur Sang, the Christian dervish. A dervish spends his life wandering from place to place, never amassing any property and living through the bounty of those whom he visits. Some years ago Mansur Sang became a Christian, but continued his rovings from one end of Persia to the other. A little bottle of iodine to relieve an aching molar, together with a pair of forceps to extract the throbbing tooth, provide him with a means of livelihood along the way. A quick wit and a pack full of Christian literature provide him with the chance to spread the news of Christianity as no missionary ever could be able to do.

Three years ago he was nearly mobbed when he attempted to scatter his literature near the shrine at Qum, the tomb of Fatima and the second shrine in holiness after Meshed. This summer he was able to wander into the very mosque itself, passing out Christian tracts as he stopped to chat with various pilgrims along the way.

Baneful Bolshevism

Though an account of the impact of Christianity on Islam in Persia is a jubilant one, there are, of course, discouraging features. Bolshevism looms large as a problem in northern Persia. The Persians and missionaries alike are fearful of the insidious advances of the Bolshevist agents. This was strikingly illustrated recently in Resht when at a Sunday evening meeting of the missionaries, one of the newcomers suggested singing one of our grand old hymns which has been set to the music of the Russian National Anthem of the Imperial Regime.

"Oh, we don't dare sing that down here," the senior missionary replied, "our neighbors might very easily spread the word around that we were sympathetic with the old order of things in Russia and the Bolshevists would start intrigues against us."

So indeed there must be wisdom and guidance lest the door swing shut and the glorious opportunity be lost.

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By J. Christy Wilson

Mr. Wilson is Engaged in Evangelistic Work in and Near Tabriz, West Persia

The Koran in a Shadow

SKIRTING the north of the great city of Tabriz is a brick-red range of hills. On the very summit we can see a little Moslem shrine, where two saints of ancient time lie buried. Local tradition has it that thirty visits to this tomb are equal in merit to a pilgrimage to Mecca. One day we made the steep climb and asked the old, blue-turbaned keeper if we might go into the shrine. He granted our request, only stipulating that we remove our shoes before we entered. Inside it was dark, but as our eyes became accustomed to the shadow we made out two large wooden sarcophagi. On the top of each was a copy of the Koran. That book of Islam, like the old saints, is dead and in the shadow. In Christ we have a message of life and light. The Word of God is living and active, and has through nearly a century been penetrating the darkness of Islam in the northwestern part of Persia.

We expect soon to celebrate the centenary of the establishment of mission work in Persia. When the first missionaries arrived there was not the slightest possibility of work for Mohammedans. They began in Urumia to work among the Assyrians or Nestorian Christians in the hope of bringing a new spiritual life to this ancient church and outpost of Christianity in Asia. From the first they looked forward *to* and prayed *for* the time when direct evangelism for Moslems would be possible. That time has come, their prayers are answered! Today we can preach the message of salvation in Christ all over Persia and we see the foundations of a church growing out of Persian Islam.

Leaving the city of Urumia, now called Rezaieh, we go up six miles to the village of Seir on the mountainside. There is the cemetery where the pioneers of Persian missions await the coming of their Lord. We read the names on the white tombstones and think of those consecrated lives — Perkins, Grants, Fidelia Fiske, Coans, Cochrans, Labarees. Here at this missionary shrine our

hearts go up in thanksgiving to God that we are privileged to see before us what they could only visualize through the eye of faith. True, it is still the law of the land that a Moslem who becomes a Christian shall be killed. But many are taking the great adventure of faith and finding the new life in Christ.

New Attitudes and Outlook

Most Persians are Mohammedans of the Shia faith and have been noted as among the most fanatical people of the world. According to their doctrine all others are unclean. Some twenty years ago Christians were not allowed on the streets when it rained, a dry Christian was bad enough, but merely brushing against a wet Christian was awful defilement. Today, Christians may go out where and when they please without one eye on the weather, this fact is symptomatic of a changed mentality. The former almost complete dominion of religious ecclesiastics has passed and the old controls of Islam are in large measure removed. People are beginning to think independently in matters of religion. Many voices come to their ears. There is propaganda for Bolshevism, since Russia joins us on the north; there is a widespread wave of materialism; there is a reformed Islam; Bahaism and other sects are making a strong appeal. In this clamor of voices it is the work of our mission to make the loving call of Christ heard just as widely as we can. In the power of the Holy Spirit we would have it that people in Persia might say:

"Where cross the crowded ways of life,
Where sound the cries of race and clan,
Above the noise of selfish strife,
We hear Thy voice, O Son of Man."

A Leader in Education

The government has recently built a broad, new avenue through the city of Urumia, tearing down houses and buildings to make the street through the heart of the city. A part of one of our mission compounds fell in the way of the new thoroughfare. An old half-basement was filled in. It was here that the first school in Persia came into being. There had been instruction in the mosques, but this could hardly be termed a school in the modern sense of the word. Mission schools have led the way in education all over Persia and have been a great influence in the enlightenment and desire for progress that is so pronounced today. They have consistently kept before them the ideal of leading students to confess Christ as their Saviour.

We think of one girl here who was the daughter of one of the most powerful religious and political leaders in this part of Persia. She became a Christian in the school and then began a battle for her faith. The powerful family were all against her and, from a worldly standpoint, it seemed she could not possibly win out. But she was supported by a great body of prevailing prayer, both here and in the home church. She suffered, but she and her faith conquered! Now she is married and has a little girl. It is generally known that she is a Christian and this fact is shown most of all by the beauty of her character, which seems more and more to partake of him for whom she was glad to face awful odds. Because Christ was the Great Teacher the educational work of our missions must minister in his name to the children and the youth of Persia.

Healing the Sick

As it was in Urumia that educational work began, so it was there that Dr. J. P. Cochran founded the first hospital in Persia. In his day prominent patients came with great caravans from hundreds of miles away. The idea of healing in the name of Christ spread over the land and today there are mission hospitals in most of the large cities. Now the Persian government is backing hospitals in many places and the ministry of healing is being multiplied though still far from adequate. Nurses are trained in both the hospitals of Tabriz and Urumia. Graduates from the Tabriz training school have gone out to serve in mission hospitals in almost every part of Persia.

Dr. W. S. Vanneman has been doing medical work in Tabriz for about forty years; his dispensary is one of the best known places in this part of the country. The street is named after this beloved physician. At one time Dr. Vanneman was commissioned to take the harem of the Shah from Tabriz to Teheran. This was no small task as there were several hundred women and children and a whole regiment of soldiers as a guard. The doctor had been physician to the Shah when he lived in Tabriz as crown prince and he could think of no one so trustworthy to bring his retinue on to the capital when he became king.

The medical work is constantly illustrating the value that Christ put on human life and bringing out in bold contrast the common ideas of Islam. A short time ago a village girl came into the hospital for an operation. The mother stayed with the girl but the father said he would have to return to the village to get the money to pay the hospital fee. The missionary doctor asked the mother how he could be certain that her husband would return to pay the bill for he had experienced cases of patients being left with bills unpaid until there was nothing else to do but send them away from the hospital and so be rid of the

necessity of their support. The woman replied, "You may rest assured he will come back, because he has left his donkey here." A loving service of healing is a language that even the most ignorant can understand. We are bound to approach people through this avenue because Christ was the Great Physician.

Christ Presented as a Personal Saviour

In spite of the cumulative general impression on the country, and in spite of the leading place of mission schools in educational advance, and in spite of the thousands who are healed in the name of Christ, our work would not stand unless Christ were being presented as a personal Saviour and unless we were doing our utmost to found a church in Persia. There is probably no place in the world where it is so difficult for people to accept and confess Christ as in Moslem lands. The penalty for apostacy from Islam is still death, though mercifully this rule is seldom enforced. Faith in Christ does mean in Persia social ostracism and possible imprisonment and the loss of family and property. Certainly in Persia the word of the apostle to new converts is true, "We must through much tribulation enter into the Kingdom of God."

One of our young men who is a convert from Islam has just returned from twenty-two days spent in a jail reeking with vermin. He went to the village where his father is a Mohammedan priest; he wanted to visit his family after a separation of several years. At first he was received very kindly, but when he refused to follow the forms of Islam and confessed his faith in Christ he was beaten and delivered to bribed guards who cast him into prison. While he was there he was busy writing out plans for the advancement of the local group of converts from Islam. Other prisoners marvelled that he could be so happy in such a vile place. He told them the reason.

There are more and more of them who are glad and willing to be partakers with Christ in His sufferings, they are founding the church that the Master is calling out of this Mohammedan land. What a high privilege it is for us who are followers of Christ in America to cooperate with them. We should be willing to share in the travail as well as the joy to see a new church born.

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